

DREAMING WHILE MAKING ENDS MEET

Charles R. Allen

(c) 1979

Los Angeles, California

Dear Independent:

We "believe you to be the talented promise of our video future. We saw a glimpse of your potential before we blew up NET (National Educational Television). You demonstrated imaginative and entrepreneurial creativity during the two season life of PEL (Public Broadcasting Laboratory). We thought about you and made vague acknowledgements to your existence in Carnegie I. We've even talked to you at Arden House, Flaherty, HTPUT and other "slipped loop" conferences.

When we were appealing to our Congress for more funds, you intruded with your complaints. When Ms. Sheila and her Carnegie II friends accepted testimony, your voices became shrill. We have been asked embarrassing questions by the Honorable Lionel Van Deerling because of your noise. Your obscenities have caused others to broaden admission to our funding gardens. Presiding over CPB-3, nice Dr. Fleming is catching the same flu and that is discomforting for us. We have fought hard for your freedoms. We've protected you from access to audience, and insulated you from money, dirty money. If we didn't you would't be independent anymore.

Fondly,  
The Director Dullery,  
for THE SYSTEM

Now that you've listened to my suspect, but not altogether fraudulent impression of the "not-so-great then" and "the-not-much-better now," let us assume, for this hour, that you are only tolerated. Further, that if you touch, connect, or become related to us you will, in our "Typhoid Mary" world, catch our diseases. You dream, dream, dream, while trying to make ends meet. You cut sausage with your tape and film editors in the shape of commercials and small miscellaneous outpourings. You fly here and there, aging, wrinkling and withering, trying to decide which posterior to kiss so that you will be lucky enough to receive half of what you need to shoot your film. Your car, house, tropical fish and family will be in debtor's peril as you borrow to shoot work print, fine cut and score your messages. At your own expense you fly to this or other northeastern cities so that foundation fops can tell you about your work and how it relates to northeastern wisdom. The "not-so-cheery then" and "inflation-ridden now."

What will you do? What can you do?

Inside the industry life seems to be somewhat the same, except we dream, dream, dream, and ends are met. We have our non-producing sloths too. Sloths are full of rhetoric, produce nothing, and cover it by playing "killer politics."

There is a small cut of your band that is highly productive. It's an ever-changing group due to anorexia, alimony payments, repossessed Steenbecks, pock-marked tape stock, and other things that are the remnants of trying to produce.

Of the talented, energetic, and enthusiastic, some are with us here today. I won't embarrass the others who "schlepped" in. And of the talented and terrific there are some I've been very pleased, if not honored, to have worked or schemed with from the station under the Hollywood sign. Those

associates have produced some interesting programs, great films, and noble "almost-made-its."

KCET is part of the Los Angeles information flow. We are the sole source for nothing, but we add to the diversity of information, enlightenment, and entertainment realized through the software we produce, co-produce, co-finance, and then transport to people via Channel 28's transmitter...PBS, cable networks, and to the world, via distribution arrangements with Polytel International.

Our productions destined for PBS and those which go traveling beyond are produced in association with independents. That is highly satisfactory. Some of our project associated producers use creative, efficient methods, and we have been the better for it. Some are well known and obvious. Others prefer to work in smaller configurations. It guarantees diversity of creative approach, burning energies of the entrepreneur who wants to produce again, and a smaller KCET core staff. It means we don't need a hotel to staff large numbers on our pleasant 5-acre "television ranch" in Los Angeles.

If we have problems with independents, it is usually a result of our inability to articulate our program directions. We now know the kinds of programs we are interested in being associated with and are launching several major efforts to develop new kinds of information software. To this end we seek, and have just concluded, a global arts conference. We asked a group of international museum curators to identify those films which were successful, first as television, but continue to have useful life as instructional informational instruments. The makers of those films and tapes were invited to talk with us for three days, in a comfortable setting, about common pitfalls and failures. Only the experienced and successful can talk comfortably about problems that stalk the best works. Most of our guests were independents. Many were affiliated producers who wanted to become independents, but who had a certain disdain for "cutting sausage" to pay rent. Because we had our own funds for this activity we did not have to invite favorite grantees from other branches of the National Endowment for the Humanities or suggested Inhumanists, or similar creatures. We were enriched by the experience and had a chance to meet many independents previously known to us solely by their credits.

Locally, we have fared less well because of collective bargaining and other labor contracts. These permit limited, "hands on" associations. Beyond the jurisdictional line our associations are of a "your hands 'n' shop" nature.

The bulk of independents who enter our life through the unsolicited transom offer little. Typically, most offerings will divide into two piles. That which was on television in the recent past, and trend films. This year's trend was death and dying. The death of a friend or relative is a significant and disturbing event in anyone's life. This year tape and film seemed to record and reveal numerous dying relatives, over 67, and of origins other than the United States.

My program executive, for this activity, tried to leap out our basement window because of depression. Currently I'm seeking a re-training grant because he will be a decent funeral director.

Last year, it was two-dimensional, simpy and sophomoric films about handicapped persons which were demeaning and joyless. We couldn't afford John Korty's DeBolt Family, which I admired very much, but did manage to obtain Gravity is My Enemy, which was hauntingly effective.

I'm proud and pleased that KCET schemed and produced with TVTV, and on May 6th schemed and cheered de Martino, Spencer and the folks of USER, INC. on to make independent access to the CPB-leased and PBS-managed transponders

of Westar I. It wasn't easy for them and now they have some idea of what station "glue" really does to your spirit. But it was a hell of a good show, and in my opinion, NUCLEAR POWER: THE PUBLIC REACTION, showed this great country doing its business in an unparalleled presentation of diverse points of view. It was human political theater. It was sincere, serious, at times irreverent, and very healthy. Had it been a co-production with KCET, I would have crunched their freedom by striking the colon from the title. De Martino guarded their freedom and pointed out that without the colon no station would carry the show. But with our blazing call letters, a golden KCET on a field of puffy, radiation-charged billowy clouds, against a pre-smog sky, it would have been a "system program." Would more stations have taken the program live, or at all, had KCET provided its "banner 'n' benchmark," take it from the distributors of PLUTONIUM: .ELEMENT OF RISK -- probably not.

That PBS was highly cooperative in facilitating USER, INC.'s satellite transmission and moving necessary operational information to stations, indicates that they have achieved new flexibilities, attitudes, and are to be thanked.

That no station in the Maryland, Washington D.C., or other nearby areas carried it live was what missed opportunity is about. In some cities you had to wait until Monday at 12:00 AM. But it was accomplished. A door opened. If others fail to follow, that door could close.

Freedom is maintained, kept healthy and interesting, by a national information flow that is highly diverse. The more points of view, the better. I've never found an issue yet that had but two points of view. This country's real fabric is woven of those overlapping and varying shades of opinion on various sides of all issues. "Broadcasters" are terrified of that sort of television, and the fairness doctrine is their best friend.

KCET may seem less responsible than its station cousins. Perhaps we make our choices differently because of "tinselitis" or our numerous faults; as in San Andreas. We no longer think of ourselves as broadcasters, but rather as the operators of an information source which adds to the Southern California information flow. It makes the station special and removes it a bit from "our fellow narrow-casters." Our objective is to reduce our dependence on tired forms that belong to our past. Form in television is a filter that at once strains both content and interest.

Existing methods of funding independent projects are limited and lacking in sufficient funding. I would like to see the WNET Lab receive more money from CPB and WNET itself. Global Village has a plan that also should be funded. Diversity in funding and methods of distribution will expand opportunities for producers, distributors, stations and viewers. This is a healthier and higher goal. And, something else is needed, and I leave you with this hastily drawn model that I would like to see you improve upon so that it could be considered by the CPB President, Dr. Fleming, and his staff at CPB-3.

According to his agency's newsletter, he is searching for a program czar or czarina to preside over a new funding scheme which to some extent implements some of the Carnegie II "grocery list" of suggestions.

I would like to see five million dollars placed in a fund for independent producers. The fund would be accountable to CFB for auditing purposes, but would have a different structure and would be located in a town that pleases you, so long as it is west of Chicago. This would achieve geographic diversity of funding. I would also like to see the fund be able to receive extra funding through matching non-Federal dollars.

A responsible board with open meetings, an advisory committee, a form of national needs assessment and a small staff would do nicely. Needs

assessments and ascertainments are important factors in decision making. Private visions on film and tape should be funded by agencies which like to do that sort of thing.

By a process of your own choosing, funding awards would be made, contracted for, produced and accounted for to the Fund. All work would be given a first chance "play or pass" offering to PBS. A pass verdict would make it available to any other means of distribution except in those instances, and we need more, where the program vehicle is designed for cable or other distribution systems.

Imaginative contract officers would be a must. -Independents deserve to enjoy most of their project's ancillary income in exchange for a job well done. And, of course, that means they get the overruns, too.

Some stations will still want to deal with you and all should. Your numbers, of just the talented, suggested that the Fund cannot handle all of the opportunities that you collectively represent.

Having gotten a grant from the Fund, hopefully with "points" in hand, you could seek additional funding or cash flow loans from a public station, Home Box Office, Showtime, or other sources to come, or the studios if you are making something that has theatrical potential.

But you must create, design and sell to CPB the system you want. If you don't, others will, and you may be standing in line behind the crowd from "commerash." They should not be kept totally away, for any system that bars talent bears a resemblance to the current dullery. And when you bar talent your walls too will deserve to be caved in or blown away.

And if you leave it to the system to define your relationship with Federal or other bucks, remember this well. You will catch this system's politically stultifying diseases which are antithetical to the creative process. You will be chained by gods of dullery and punished in the horror chambers of the dreaded SPC (Station Program Cooperative). The croupiers of overhead will scrape your grants. You will be tolerated, but nothing will change. Dream, dream, dream - while trying to make ends meet.

We are in a magic moment caused by three conditions:

1. Imaginative regulation.
2. Less traditional funding patterns suggested by CPB and NTIA which want to fund counter-obvious telecommunications activities
3. Accelerated introduction of new production and distribution technologies.

If you squabble and quarrel like so many noisy truants, you will miss this exciting moment born of the ashes of dullery of what we have on screen now. The dividend can be yours. If you fail to take full advantage, you richly deserve to dream on whether you make ends meet or not.

Headed for "mark up" this summer is HR 3333 a.k.a. THE COMMUNICATIONS ACT of 1979. The notion that any of us should produce at the highly restricted pleasures of the 1934 is a rude, cynical joke - useful only to those who factor profits. It is to me only chains that deny opportunities on the assumption that the audience must be protected with hypnotic dullery: grovel!

HR 3333 looks good to me. So long as non-commercial telecommunications entities, or whatever we must call ourselves to remain grant-worthy, are able to keep the funds in any "little club" the U.S. audience will be poorly served. Local programming will be frosting for a future cake that will never be served, and platinum plated transmitters will be common. Most of the public television stations now on the air should be given one last big grant designed to fully automate all functions, retire staff, end auctions, and leave local programming to the street wandering portapackers. It would be more interesting to watch

the life as it passes a live camera in a supermarket than to review the patronizing pastiche of what the "poor system" can only afford now. The bankruptcy is in imagination, energy, ingenuity; it has nothing to do with bucks.

The folks who put RF 3333 together know something that it has taken years to discover. Local programming is paper promised backed up by dullery meant to make Supertrain a relief. In public television the local programming performance has not risen with the Community Service Grants. It would appear that if that fund became drastically more generous, local programming of any worth could vanish totally.

This is not to say that there are not exceptions but note that they are not common to or necessarily found in the "big cities." Local programming is too often realized as a gratuitous pile of dull pomp offered to the Altars of Funding and Regulation as a "wink" to keep the money coming forever.

Nothing goes on forever but plastic plants and nuclear "hot rocks." The changes introduced in HR 3333 are designed to cause programs to be produced for people. FOR PEOPLE HAPPENS TO BE THE PUBLIC. Not little artistic one-way communications, and not an auction or fundraiser that is written off and averaged as local programming. HR 3333 doesn't say you can't have platinum transmitters, or 20 handheld Ickeegooey cameras or other technical junk. It simply redirects all who would apply for bucks to make programs for people. People. Why people? Because it is their money whether they choose to view or not. Station operators who want to spend whole careers flying to the big 9, little 6 annual meeting of drivelers, or be members of National Association of Easy Dullery, may continue in fine style playing old auction tapes.

The players are the producers and Dr. Fleming's program fund scheme appears to be a promising hope. HR 3333 is the laxative that introduces momentary cramps but, on the other side, is a better life for the tax paying viewer. It's time to quit conferencing for a living, and time to produce for people. Don't sit there, do something. Your tears won't cause your dreams to be realized at 24 frames per second, or to leap from your newer technologies to dance down 525 lines to entertain, inform or enlighten people. I respectfully ask you to rise to the opportunity.